



PVNET celebrates 12 years as Peninsula's computer technology pioneer

By Michelle Fisher Special to the News

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Creative. Forward-thinking. Responsive. Pioneering. These are just a few of the words used to describe Ted Vegvari and the interns operating his ever-expanding computer technology center, Palos Verdes on the NET, which is celebrating its 12th anniversary.

Twelve years ago, the Internet was still under construction, and most people had never heard of "listservs" or GIS. Few understood how to navigate the Web, and even fewer knew how to build a Web site. But PVNET director Ted Vegvari was determined to change that.

"Ted and PVNET were the ones to get city governments, and even nonprofit organizations, to move forward with technology, starting with hosting and developing Web sites back in the early 1990s," says Dennis McLean, director of finance and information technology for Rancho Palos Verdes.

"The Internet was not yet a phenomenon. I felt that it was going to be, so we started preparing to bring the South Bay into the world of the Internet," Vegvari says. "Web pages then were simple, but it was still very exciting."

He began by reserving the names of local cities and creating Web sites for the cities at no cost. Vegvari and his crew held workshops at the Peninsula Center Library and taught growing crowds about how to use the Internet. On his crew were Pamela Piller, Marvin and Marilyn Livak, Herb Stark, Roger Mills, Betty Meyer, Larry Futrell and two young interns who had no idea just how far PVNET would take them.

Humble beginnings

Founding intern Hoon Kim recalls building the computers and networks at PVNET and RPV City Hall at age 16. "I worked on setting up City Hall and maintained their computers. There were challenging opportunities so you had to seem more mature than you really were," he says.

More than a decade later, Kim is now a capital markets analyst at computer giant Microsoft. "I would say that Ted was a pioneer of sorts — he was a strong catalyst in making people more aware of how the computer would become an important part of their lives," he says.

Vegvari remembers lugging “huge” computers into the library and being surprised at the turnout each month. “We outgrew the library meeting room. It was hard to address all the questions and execute our goals, so it was obvious we needed our own place,” he says.

Vegvari credits former RPV council members John McTaggart and Marilyn Lyon as being instrumental in helping PVNET find a home at RPV City Hall.

“We had three or four portables not being used,” McTaggart recalls. “Ted’s plans were to allow the young kids to learn about computers, and it seemed like a good thing for the community. I asked the other council members to look into it.”

This marked the beginning of PVNET’s partnership with the Peninsula cities, especially with RPV, which, Vegvari says, is much more than just a landlord: “They’re our angel actually. They created the opportunity for us to expand and offer more services to local residents.”

“I’m glad we were able to accommodate his needs at the time because he has accommodated our needs so well,” says McTaggart, noting that he himself subscribes to several of the 40 listservs that keep residents apprised of breaking news. “Now we have Channel 33 and we are sharing even more information, which is great.”

Taking pride

RPV Mayor Steve Wolowicz notes that PVNET’s contribution to the community grows each year, as evidenced by the development of Channel 33. RPV/PVNET Multimedia Studio officially opened last October after a three-year effort by Vegvari, RPV Councilman Peter Gardiner, former School Board member Gabriella Holt and McTaggart.

“It is a major benefit to the community. This is only the start, and we are going to see a lot more informative programming,” says Wolowicz. “In our city, we have such a demand for information. We react well when we are an informed community.”

Not only is the new educational channel benefiting viewers, Vegvari says, but also area teens, who are learning to use the latest equipment for digital video editing, recording and animation at the new facility.

Tyler Fradkin, a freshman, is getting a crash course in camera work and video editing. “I learned to set up for the shows and understand the cameras. I tape and edit all the ‘City Talk’ shows,” says Fradkin.

Fradkin hopes to follow in the footsteps of his PVNET mentor, Andy Huang, who attends USC Film School. Huang and another former intern, Derrick Auyoung, will be interviewed about their computer animation careers on the show “PVNET Presents” on Channel 33.

Auyoung, a computer animator with such credits as “Charlotte’s Web” and “Chronicles of Narnia,” says that PVNET played a major role in helping him land his dream job.

“It helped a lot in my interviews with [top animation house] Rhythm & Hues, having that

confidence and experience,” says Auyoung. “I learned there that work could be fun, and what I’m doing now at work is fun, too.”

Jean Etter, former work experience/education coordinator at Peninsula High, says more than 500 students have been PVNET interns. “It helps them with their future careers and also allows them to utilize computers in new ways. Ted offers something I’ve never seen available at any school,” she says.

Wolowicz concurs, saying, “The opportunities he provides young people are outstanding ... There are many colleges that do not offer what PVNET is offering.”

PENHI senior Alex Cohen had never heard of GIS technology before coming to PVNET. Now he is using this technology to develop his senior project – a map of his school that will show the demographics of the neighborhood. “Now it’s easy to learn about GIS and use it,” he says.

Sonali Tambe, who heads the GIS department, says that people of all ages are encouraged to explore their interests at the center. “There is so much to learn, and Ted really has great vision. He knows where the technology is going and he guides you that way,” Tambe says.

Founding intern Bryce Stockwell, who owns a Web design firm, remembers the support and sense of solidarity. “Ted gave us a lot of latitude,” he says. “He exposes people to technology and if he sees aptitude, then he’ll show you a new tool. He’ll try to find what you enjoy doing and how you can contribute.”

Stockwell adds that interns learn about “giving back” through teaching classes and providing technical support to the RPV and Rolling Hills Estates city halls. “Ted really cares about the kids and the community,” he says.

“It’s been a great collaboration – it really has,” says McLean of the city’s relationship with Vegvari, who is purchasing a portable building on the City Hall site thanks to a generous donation by Jonathan and Mary Tu, whose son is in the multimedia internship program.

RHE City Manager Doug Prichard calls PVNET “an important asset” to the Peninsula. “They played an instrumental role in bringing Rolling Hills Estates City Hall into the computer and Internet age,” he says.

“We greatly appreciate the work of Ted and his staff for the information they make available to our residents,” says Judy Smith, assistant city manager of Palos Verdes Estates. “PV on the NET provides a valuable community service.”

For more information about PV on the NET, go to www.palosverdes.com; for Channel 33 programming information, go to www.palosverdes.com/rpv/ch33.